

# DARE



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# Prologue



## *Fire*

They marked me with paint. It was a molten paint, and they dabbed it into my skin with a brush, its bristles made to endure the heat. The smell hit me before the burn did, but I'd been screaming for a while by then—as they'd dragged me across the beach, into the castle, up the tower—so the first swipe of the liquid didn't make a difference.

Between cries, I squirmed against the guards, squirmed against them so much that the markings took a long, long time to finish. The giant, man-shaped shadows blamed me for that, saying, "Hold still, you little monster!"

But I wasn't a monster. I was scared and scared and scared, because where were Mama and Papa? Would they storm the tower and come for me?

I tasted tears, a girl crying. I remembered that she was me, that I needed to protect her from the pain, and that loosened the rest of my fight.

I'd gotten glimpses of the other painted figures in this place, so I knew what symbols the guards brushed into a collar around my

neck—symbols of this land. Even though I couldn't see them on me, I knew the markings, as I knew this world.

This was the Kingdom of Summer. This was an ocean's world of flows and breaks and pushes and retreats, a world of sandstorms and waves, and coasts and dunes, and swamps and marshes. The hot air dripped down spines, and it moistened bodies, and it salted mouths, and it spiked tempers.

This world had taken me prisoner.

They tossed me into a black shell of bars. It was a cell, a cage. I raged against the grille, my voice multiplying down the tower's throat and trembling at the edges. The wardens called it "worse than a proper Summer fit."

They sneered that I belonged to them now. I shouted that they were wrong, but the oafs just laughed, and I made a plan to bite their pinkies off if they came near me again. I almost succeeded when they did, and it got me into trouble, and trouble hurt.

I imagined a safer place, a pocket of sand to nestle within, or the tide pulling me in gently, taking me to an unseen island where I could hide. Myth said that such a land existed, an isle lost amidst the Summer Kingdom's many seas, so that's where my soul and mind went, wanting to stay there until Mama and Papa found me, until they rescued me.

But they didn't come. They didn't come for me because they couldn't, because the kingdom wouldn't let them, because I was trapped.

Soon after, I lost my voice, and it didn't return, and I didn't care. The evil world expected me to curl up in the corner like a seashell—silent and small and breakable—forgetting that a seashell held the roar of an entire ocean inside it. I didn't need a voice, only my teeth and my dreams to save me.

They called me a freak of nature. They said I was a fool captive, one of the mad, made of madness, but I didn't know why.

I knew only one thing.

I was ten years old.

# 1



## *Fire*

A little toe coasted over my foot. Reaching my ankle, the toe started to nudge, its owner whispering my name, tugging me from another daydream. Laying on my back, I kept my eyes on the lines scratched into the wall above my head, the ones that I'd worked on in the dead of night, when the guards weren't looking. I just wanted to stare at those lines and find a way to dissolve into them.

But the nudging and whispering wanted my attention. "Flare? Are you awake?"

I flopped over and scowled at my cellmate. *What?*

Pearl gave me a wobbly smile, because she'd known I wasn't sleeping, because living in the tower's darkness, our sight had a nocturnal sharpness to it, like a coral's edge, so that we saw each other fine. Years ago, they'd thrown me in here with her, forgotten and forgettable.

I kept track of our days. Pearl was thirteen. I was sixteen.

Resting on our sides, on beds of dried seaweed that covered the stone floor, we watched each other through the murk of dawn. "Tell

me what I look like,” she begged.

Though neither of us had seen our reflections since we were runts, she’d begun to crave descriptions of herself.

But what did it matter? We had plenty of other things to worry about, like the hunger gnawing on our tummies, and diseases floating through our blood, and the venomous gleam in the wardens’ eyes.

That didn’t stop me from softening once I saw how she shivered, once I saw the desperation mangling her face. Pearl was having one of her morning frights, when everything in her tingled with anxiousness, when she needed something good.

I stroked her arm. *Only if you sing to me about the island.*

“Again?” she whined.

*Again*, I mouthed.

“Fine, then.”

So I went first. Because Pearl had learned to understand me long ago, she read my lips as I described the shimmering silver oysters of her eyes and her nose like a paddle’s shaft, lengthy enough to pull a canoe.

I left out the scabs from water bug bites. I had them, too, crusted on my elbows.

Afterward, Pearl took her turn. *“Seek not, find not,”* she chimed, *“the Isle of Lost Rain...”*

Everyone in the four kingdoms—Spring and Summer and Autumn and Winter—knew about the island. Summer’s great mystery drifted somewhere uncharted in its oceans, but no one had found the Isle, and none believed it existed.

But I did. I knew more about it than anyone. While the Isle of Lost Rain was amusement to the world, it was my buried treasure, it was *mine*, and someday I would see it for myself. I would flee this prison, daring to find that haven where the rains had been born and special waters flowed, with a dewy forest at its heart—and, best of all, glittering sand. I’d touch that sacred sand, and I’d press my palm into its heat, and I’d know I was free.

The song trickled from Pearl’s lips, a melodic yarn passed through

generations and across borders. She was tired of singing it for me, but she did it anyway. With the harmonious bounce in my ears, I went back to gazing at the low ceiling, at the drawing that I'd scratched there—while sitting on Pearl's shoulders, using the chipped notch of a seashell that I kept hidden—since our jailers were less likely to glance up. Before and after sleep, I would stare at my drawing, the lines and curves forming a clam-shaped mass alone in the middle of the sea, bobbing apart from Perylyn's mainland and the castle's shores, waiting to be discovered, waiting for me.

*"Sun leads, yellow rays, the Isle of Lost Rain.*

*When sun fades, mist grows, the Isle—"*

Pearl choked on the rest of the song. Commotion rose from the stairway, boots stomping down the corridor, people marching in our direction and flinging orange light across the hall, the bars of a dozen cells reflected on the ground. Black silhouettes rippled against the torch-flamed rock.

Rising on my elbow, I cocked my head to listen. It was too early for water and gruel, or for the guards to be in a baiting mood, so why else would they come here?

Their arrival triggered a rumpus through the prison, manacles scraping along the ground and voices crying out. There was Lotus, the woman split by two selves, her features jumping between a gleeful child and its scolding mother. Ashe, the elder who spoke to the ghosts of the formerly chained. Reef, the boy who mauled himself with whatever tool he could get his hands on and then shriveled into shame afterward.

There was Pearl, who got the willies every day, who bawled that hiccups meant her lungs were shrinking or the pounding of her heart meant she was dying.

There was me.

There used to be Tempest, a lad addicted to counting and figures. Sometimes, he would yank on chunks of his hair while puzzling out digits, but he taught me and Pearl our numbers, sharing our cell until a fever took him.

I lifted the seaweed bed and tallied other scratches that I'd made on the floor, adding up to twelve months. Another year passed so soon? Trading day already?

Still, it was bizarre and strange and weird to hear a stampede invading this part of the tower. No soul from our block was ever desired or chosen.

Pearl might as well have read my mind. At the jingling of keys, she whimpered, "Flare, are they coming for us?"

My eyes tripped over to her. *I don't know.*

"You think it's true, what the guards are saying about the Trade? About the prince?"

Rumors dripped into the castle's prison. Just about now, Winter ambassadors would come to Summer for the Fool Trade, fishing for simpletons and sometimes us, the mad, as they called our lot. All the kingdoms joined in, so that we belonged to our monarchs as property and slaves, for work or laughs or whatever they wanted.

In between belches, the wardens had been bending each other's ears, blabbing about a new trading troll. Instead of the ambassadors, the Winter queens would be serving up their grandnephew, heir to the throne. Word was, the prince was of age, able to do the job.

Pearl's words clawed at me, scrabbling for purchase, a frantic hunt for safety. "They say he's a cruel prince, he is. That his cruelty rivals our own king. That he'll relish the Fool Trade—he means to slay us, he does."

I gathered her quivering hands. *Shh. If he tries to, we'll battle him, and then we'll conquer him, and then we'll dethrone him, and then we'll feed him to warthogs, or sharks, or swamp crocs.*

"What if warthogs or sharks or swamp crocs are afraid to eat him? He's an almighty prince."

*Almighty princes don't exist. We'll show the scoundrel.*

She nodded. "We'll band together."

A fleshy arm—Pyre's—popped through the shadows, his finger pointing at me. The word dropped from him like an anchor. "You."

Me.

“You. Stand.”

For what? Had I been chosen?

“I ain’t saying it again,” Pyre, the guard, warned. “Stand up or I’ll make you.”

Ugh. I knew what that meant, had the proof of it across my back, but no way was I letting go of my scared friend, or leaving my Isle of Lost Rain chiseled into the ceiling, to be shipped off to the Kingdom of Winter. Anything was better than Winter.

Everyone knew what scientists did to fools there.

I shed Pearl’s hands and spun around, settling on all fours. If he wanted me, he could come and fetch me, because he had proof of me on him, too—a few well-placed bites.

“Have it your way,” he said and unlocked the door.

This made for more hubbub. Lotus was the child today, clapping her hands in excitement. Ashe narrated the scene to his ghost. Reef grimaced and began to throttle his knee with his chains.

Once the bolt unlatched and the door groaned open, Pearl scrambled out of the seaweed bed and scuttled to the corner like a crab, mumbling to her feet. “Get away, get away, get away, get away, get away.”

I summoned fury and fists. Walking toward me, Pyre’s eagerness ripened, and that’s why he and his brood didn’t chain me like they did the others. These bullies were bored up here, and they liked to clobber, and took wagers on how long a match would last. They liked making me angry, and I spoiled for the chance to pound them, though I would lose the brawl eventually, because the men were bigger than me. Anyone was bigger than me.

Anyone except for Pearl, who always had to watch these battles.

Guilt sprung anew, stalling my attack. Pyre lunged and grabbed me by the ear, hauling me up. Twisting the lobe, he launched me into the bars, my cheekbone smacking into iron, a bright pain seizing the side of my face. Before I could turn around and kick or scratch, he had my arms pinned, the hot weight of manacles clamping and binding me to the grille.

Then he ordered Pearl to stand, and I heard the shuffling of her feet, the cracking of her unused knees as she obeyed. At least he hadn't done the same thing to her, whacked or cuffed her to the grate. She wasn't a fighter, and she'd never ruffled him, and her own irons were attached to a wall anyway. He just wanted her up and on display like a damn tuna.

Wiping his hands, he stepped out of our cage, the key wailing inside the latch as he twisted it back into place. He leaned toward me, his eel breath beating against my mouth. "There we go," he cheered. "Nice and comfy. Thought you'd learn by now, but then you half-baked half-wits are too dumb for that."

While he was too dumb to stay back. My wrists might be bound, but my fingers weren't. Catching the back of his neck, I yanked him forward, slamming his nose into the bars.

He howled and staggered back, calling me the usual names as he covered his nozzle. He wasn't bleeding or broken, because I didn't have that kind of strength, but he was hurting something awful.

"Filthy, fool bi—"

"What is this," a voice said.

Although the words made a question, it wasn't one. It was a demand, a dispassionate thing polished into a threat, the smooth tone like nothing I'd ever heard in my life, not of Summer, nor of servitude. It was chilled to the bone and... princely.

I saw him first in a reflection, in a puddle on the ground, from a leak in the ceiling. I mapped out in the water the hints of a face, a villainous shape angled down and hitting me like sleet might. I was a stranger to snow and sleet, but as a once-free runt living amid these shores, I'd seen foreign landscapes woven into ship flags whenever the other Seasons visited Summer. I'd seen images of a powdery world and imagined its spiteful cold.

My gaze strayed upward. I bore no comparison to his extreme height or strong body, funny for someone of his fledgling years, or at least any boy I'd seen in here.

A cloak lapped at his frame, trimmed in fur and bristling at the

collar, unbearable in the heat of this kingdom. In the valley of his shirt, an empty glass vial dangled from a chain around his neck. His skin was a deadpan white, made paler by his dark brows and long blue hair tied at the nape of his neck.

Goose bumps beaded along my arms. His black eyes studied me without seeing me.

It was true. The Prince of Winter was of age—my age or a snippet older.

*What is this*, he'd said.

*This* had meant me.

The tower guards bowed in greeting. A ring of knights surrounded him, men and women in breastplates and purple capes, the Winter color a shock to my eyes, much like his blue hair. Some kind of feral noise broke from me, and I reached out, longing to feel color and color and color!

The manacles snapped my wrists back in place. The prince stepped from the circle and toward the grate while Pyre batted his puffy fingers my way. "As you see, Sire. It's a mad fool."

"I am aware of what it is," the prince drawled.

A female knight did the rest of the talking for him. "His Highness expects to know why you're disturbing it."

"We're to keep them harnessed for you. She wasn't shackled yet." When the prince said nothing, my nemesis gulped. "That's our duty. The mad are—"

The prince twisted and backhanded Pyre across the face. His massive head whipped to the side, a geyser of blood spurting from his mouth. The smack vibrated through the hall, a wet sail hitting wood, stinging the ears, and I leapt forward, as far as the bars would allow, the better to see. The prince had struck so swiftly, so fluidly, not a flinch to his features.

I'd put my very soul into trouncing Pyre. The numb prince had dealt with him like an afterthought.

His lackeys stood unblinking while the Summer guards gaped. The prince trained his eyes back on me, and I guessed what he must

see—and smell. He saw a bronze-skinned girl, thinner than fish bones, with bared teeth and a jungle of shoulder-length hair. He saw a girl with a mind as frayed as the roughspun rags she wore, who stank of rot and sweat.

He thought he saw a fool.

With a single finger, he flicked aside a gnarled lock, his eyes hooking onto the symbols painted around my throat. He motioned to them. “And the reason for these?”

Pyre grumbled, “She deserves it. Got a reckless, hotheaded madness about her.”

“What else?”

“Ain’t nothing else.”

A Winter knight sneered. “Then she isn’t much different from anyone in Perilyn.”

“Go ahead and call us peppery, but ain’t no Summer citizen like this one. She fights back. Go for her, and she’ll chomp off your thumb with a vengeance. Six years, and the little ‘beach beast’ ain’t learned what’s good for her.” The Winter clan squinted at the term, and he explained, “She’s a sand drifter.”

I rammed my chains into the bars. I hated hearing those two words thumping from Pyre’s mouth. They belonged to my family, not to this lout. Perilyn, the land of Summer, called me mad, and it also called me, and people like me, families like mine, sand drifters. That was my life before this place, before they caught me.

The prince stared, taking my measure and then switching to my cellmate, who was chanting to herself. He paused on her too long, way too long for my fancy. I shifted, blocking his view of her.

Disgust leapt across his face, then unfurled into merciless pleasure. He jerked his chin at one of his knights, then at Pearl, who mewled.

No, I thought. Not her! Winter will hurt her!

Insult him, I thought. Get him closer, I thought. Hurt him first. Hurt the prince!

He sauntered past our cage, moving on to other prisoners. I

whisked up saliva, lots of saliva, and spat. The glop shot from my mouth and splattered the tip of his booted foot, halting him in his tracks.

He walked backward. Abreast of the bars, he glanced at me without a shred of surprise. My fingernails and knuckles readied themselves, but then his hand slid my way, in a faint and baffling brush of movement...tenderness?

He made contact. I stilled, the nook beneath my jaw giving itself to the pads of his fingers, scant against my pulse.

It was calm and regal and almost kindly when he began to squeeze. I hardly noticed until my throat shrank, his grip snatching the breath from me, threads of air struggling to get in and out. I tried to wrench myself away, but he pushed into me more.

Not a sound crawled out of me, not even a wheeze. I saw the moment when it dawned on the prince that I had no voice. His expression didn't change, but he inspected me with a deep cant of his head, and I honored him with my most ferocious glare, because prey had to use their best glares against predators, in or out of this tower, in the hot or the cold, in Summer or Winter. He merely waited as if he had all day, a satisfied evil creeping to the surface, to the black ice of his eyes.

I saw it. He wanted me to kneel.

He held on, the press of him urging me down like a mutt. My legs buckled. His fingers snapped open, releasing me to the ground, one of my knees smacking the stone and the other bent. I was quaking, kneeling, dammit.

The toe of his boot fit through the irons. He wiped my spit on the rag of my skirt, then jabbed my leg and spoke to his knights. "This one," he said before walking away.